

## AN ORAL APPROACH TO TRANSLATION

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*(Note: In some parts of the world the use of the words "white" and "aboriginal" may be felt to be offensive. In this article no racist meaning is intended, but rather the words are used as the natural way of referring to the people who make up a translation team and the part they each play in the work of the team.)*

In many communities round the world writing is something which has arrived only recently. For generations right up to the present time all communication in these communities has been oral communication, that is communication which takes place as people speak to each other face to face.

For people in these communities writing and literature are still quite new and strange as a means of passing on knowledge and expressing feelings and emotions. Their experts in language are still the storytellers, those who compose songs and poems, and the powerful speakers and preachers. And much of what they now have in printed form in their own languages may have been produced from material which was first recorded in oral form.

People from the kind of community we are talking about generally find the work of Bible translation difficult, if it is carried out as a process of working from a printed text to a written translation. And often what they produce by this process is not accepted by other speakers as the normal and natural way of using their own language. There is therefore much to be said for taking an approach to translation which allows them to produce text in the natural way, that is by speaking it.

In this short article I want to describe how we have been trying out an oral approach in training programs with teams of translators working in Australian aboriginal languages.

### **The translation teams**

In our training programs we have been working with translation teams made up of two or three aboriginal people who can speak English and a white linguist or literacy worker who knows their language. It is true that the level of literacy is quite low among the tribal aboriginal people, and that there are very few highly educated people. However in most groups it is possible to find people who have received a reasonable education and who are able to speak English quite well. It is from these people that members of the translation teams are chosen.

Training programs are held right in the area where the people live, and at each program we have teams representing just a small number of languages (from two to five). As far as possible we have tried to do our work in a natural setting, out of doors. The people who make up the teams are usually nominated by their local church, which has an interest in the translation of Scriptures for all its people.

### **The oral method**

For the purpose of translation the text of a story is divided up into a number of sections or episodes, each of suitable length. (Wherever possible these are

the natural parts of the story.) One episode is taken at a time, and the translation procedure consists of a number of steps:

1. The starting point is the text in English, and the first step is to read the whole episode in English.
2. Members of the team discuss the episode in the aboriginal language. This is a very full discussion as the members explore together all aspects of the meaning of the text. It covers details of the setting of the story, how the story unfolds, any tricky points of meaning, and so on.
3. After the meaning has been thoroughly discussed a selected aboriginal member of the team takes the role of storyteller and speaks the whole episode to the rest of the group. This is recorded on a cassette recorder and becomes the "first draft" translation.
4. The next stage is a review of the first draft by the whole group. This takes place as the story is played back from the recorder, in whole and in part, as many times as necessary. Members of the group check that the translation is complete and correct as far as the text is concerned; and they check that it is the clearest and most natural expression of the meaning in the aboriginal language. All comments and criticisms made are noted.
5. A new draft is now produced which takes account of the comments and criticisms which have been made. This can be done by the original translator telling the part of the story again, or it may be done by making adjustments to a written out version of the first draft.
6. The end of the process is to make the story available for wider checking and use, in both spoken and written form. If the second draft is in the form of a recording it can be written down. Or, if it is in written form it can be spoken by the translator and recorded.

### **Advantages of the oral approach**

The most obvious advantage of the oral method is that it results in translation which is completely natural. With this method a word-for-word literal approach to translation is hardly possible; and even those translators whose work is terribly literal on paper are able to produce natural meaningful translation when they work this way.

It is not only the individual sentences of a text that turn out to be more natural with the oral method. The method as we have been applying it also results in more natural story structure than other methods in which translators tend to work along sentence by sentence. This is because within each episode the translator is free to follow the most natural order and arrangement of the material as he expresses the text in his own language.

Of course it is true that success here will depend on careful division of the text into episodes. As far as possible the episodes for translation should follow the natural divisions of the text. We have found with our method that aboriginal translators are able to deal with up to 10 or 12 verses as a single section, and most text will break into fairly natural divisions with episodes of this length. (People are sometimes surprised to hear that there are translators who can keep the details of 10 or 12 verses of text in their mind and deal with

all that as a single unit. However it seems clear to me that people in communities where all communication has been oral communication have a greater memory capacity than those of us who have learned to make use of writing.)

Not only is translation more natural when the oral method is used, it also tends to be more interesting. The reason for this seems to be that the oral approach is able to make full use of all the language skills of aboriginal translators, because it works with what is the normal means of communication and expression for them.

Another big advantage of an oral approach to translation is that it makes it possible to include in translation teams people who are expert in the use of their own languages but who cannot read or write. Such non-literate translators can take their place as equals with other team members, and can make a good contribution to the work of the team. In fact at one recent workshop we had excellent results with a team in which none of the aboriginal members could read or write.

### **The team approach is essential**

From what we have said already it should be clear that we have only tried to use the oral method of translation in situations where we can get a group of people to work together as a team. And really the team approach is an essential feature of the oral method. It is only in a group that we can have the proper situation for oral production of a text. The translator can only really act as the storyteller who takes the place of the original author when he is face to face with other speakers of his language and can retell the story for them.

We consider the group situation to be so important to the success of the oral translation method that we have tried to do all we can to get the most natural setting for conversation and storytelling. So we have often taken groups outside under the shade of a tree for their work. And we have tried not to let the cassette recorders have too prominent a position in the groups.

The team approach, which is necessary for the proper working of the oral method, brings with it another advantage. It allows all the members of a group of translators to make their contribution to the total effort, and in such a way that the skills of the individual members complement each other to a large extent. The most obvious illustration of this is the way in which the aboriginal translators' abilities of expression in their own language complement the white translator's ability to understand the English text clearly. So, apart from the advantages of the oral method itself, we find that we can achieve with a team a better translation than any of the individuals in the team could produce if they worked alone.

As already mentioned checking and review of draft translation are done as a part of the oral method. In this, too, we find that the team approach has an advantage over the situation where translators work alone. With the right people making up the team it is hardly necessary to have any further checking of a team translation before it is made available for circulation and use.

### **Distributing the translation**

After each of the training programs held so far we have gone ahead to produce what has been translated as a small book, which will be distributed in the community as soon as possible after the program has taken place. It may seem a bit strange to do this in a situation where many people cannot read, where almost all communication is oral, and where the translation itself has been produced by the oral method. However there is value in producing a book for two reasons. Firstly, the book represents the achievement of the translation team in a form that can be seen and handled, and so it is important for keeping up interest in translation. Then those people who have learned to read will be able to make use of it: in communities where reading is a new experience those who can read are usually eager to get whatever they can in their own language.

Of course the new translation is made available to people who cannot read, too. Even though it is printed in a book, it will be in fact be heard by most of the people as it is read aloud in family groups by those who can read. And cassettes can be provided too, copied from the master cassette prepared by the translation team. I know of some situations where people are in fact making use of books and cassettes together, to help them in the process of learning to read.

There is already a warm acceptance of the material that has been produced by our translation teams. Its quality has been recognised by the people themselves, and they are also glad to have it because it is the product of the creative effort of members of their own community. In some situations there has been a great increase in the desire to have and to use the Scriptures in the aboriginal languages, as parts have come alive for translators and readers through the training programs.

DONALD S. DEER and JOHN ELLINGTON

## **LEARNING TO DEAL WITH TRANSLATION PROBLEMS**

A REPORT ON THE EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING IN A WORKSHOP SITUATION

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At a recent translators' workshop held in Kinshasa, Zaire, it was decided that the afternoon practical work should be devoted to a single complete passage, with the participants working on only a few verses each day. Each of the participating translation teams was asked to spend an hour and a half translating six to eight verses. Then a final period of 45 minutes was set aside for discussion of the problems in the passage and the various solutions to these problems in the different translations.